

READY FOR THE FRAY



THE HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN SCOTTISH
REGIMENT (PRINCESS MARY'S) 1920 TO 2002

The battle of Caen and Cussy

By the Canadian Scottish Regiment

From Ready for the Fray

By R.H. Roy

CHAPTER VIII

The Normandy Campaign—Caen

By June 12 the situation of the Allied forces in Normandy was such that the planners of "Overlord" could think in terms of expansion and breakout. By D plus five the eight Allied airborne and seaborne divisions had linked their assault areas together to form a continuous bridgehead some fifty miles long, varying in depth from eight to thirty miles. More divisions, both infantry and armoured, were coming ashore. On the right of the Canadians the British XXX Corps, now strengthened by the British 7th Armoured and 49th Infantry Divisions, was about to launch an attack on Villers-Bocage about ten miles south-west of Putot-en-Bessin. Farther west the Americans had seized Caumont and were struggling towards St. Lo. Within a week they were to cut across the Cherbourg Peninsula, a preliminary to their eventual major attack to the south-east which would bring the Allied line swinging like a gate opening to the heart of France.

Caen was the "hinge" of this "gate", for from Caen there radiated like the spokes in a wheel a road network essential to mobile armoured operations on a large scale. North-east of Caen these roads led to the Channel ports, and the importance of these ports to the Allied armies dependent on seaborne supplies was not lost to the Germans. Moreover, the enemy had started launching his "V-1" flying bombs on England on June 13, and it was natural for him to assume that the Allies would make every effort to seize the flying bomb launching sites scattered along the Pas de Calais, an effort which, it was felt, would originate

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in the Caen area. But most important was the enemy's belief that the Normandy invasion was but a feint—a preliminary to a later and more massive assault on the Pas de Calais area itself. Such an assault would coincide with an Allied breakout from Normandy, all of which reinforced the opinion of the German High Command that Caen must be defended at all costs to prevent the linking of the Allied forces in Normandy and those expected to land 150 miles to the north-east. The Allied deception plan, coupled with misleading and conflicting German intelligence, made the enemy base his strategic planning on false assumptions which delighted and surprised the Allied commanders.

Strategic delight, however, does not mean tactical pleasure. The British-Canadian forces around Caen were the first to run into the hard hitting panzer divisions the enemy had rushed to the invasion area, and in the following weeks air reconnaissance, patrols, observation posts, interrogation of prisoners and French civilians, and other sources of intelligence, made it quite evident that the enemy was bringing in more infantry and armour to block the way to Caen. The German crust around the city was thickening, but he still did not have the initiative.

Montgomery's determination to keep the enemy off balance and prevent him from roping off the Allied bridgehead resulted in two major attacks on the British front during June. Both of these attacks, naturally, affected the Canadian division to some extent, but for the most part indirectly. Yet a holding role in Normandy for the Canadian Scottish, as for every other battalion, meant constant attrition, continual danger and a steady if small loss every day of men killed or wounded.

No man was more active in encouraging the wounded and caring for the dead in the Canadian Scottish than Padre Seaborn. At Putot especially his attention to those who had fallen won the hearts of all ranks. He had heavy responsibilities, and none was heavier, nor sadder, than that of ensuring that the dead were given a decent, Christian burial. He would search night and day for the bodies of the fallen, often going very close to the front line positions and displaying an utter contempt for enemy fire. At Putot someone got hold of a two-wheeled French farm cart and a horse, and placed this transportation at his disposal. With one or two men to help him, he could be seen wandering among

the fields and orchards searching for the dead, collecting their personal belongings for return to their families, cutting off identity discs, and transporting the bodies to the battalion's temporary cemetery behind Putot. It was a grim, necessary task, and the handling of men who had fallen two or three summer days before was a most unenviable business. "Burying Bob", as the padre was nicknamed, soon began to smell of the dead himself. R.S.M. Fisher, who replaced R.S.M. Stothard when the latter was wounded, describes what happened:

C.Q.M.S. MacDermott, who was at battalion headquarters in an old farmhouse, got a brilliant idea; why not give the padre a bath? One night (June 15) after supper, all the pots and pans, anything that would hold water, were put on the stove. The padre was asked to be there. In one of the rooms MacDermott had resurrected an old-fashioned, high-backed, portable bathtub of the type you would now see only in a museum. He and Jimmy Sutherland filled it with hot water. The padre came in and, without a doubt, outside the men who were wet on the beaches or while crossing the river, he had the first bath in the battalion in Normandy. This goes to show something of the high respect in which Padre Seaborn was held by all ranks, from the Commanding Officer to the newest private in the battalion.¹

There are many facets to life within an infantry battalion at the front. This was one of them. Religion was another—a direct, basic, uncomplicated religion in every soldier which is intensified with the closeness and suddenness of death. It was about this time that H/Captain Seaborn began to hear the men ask: "When are we going to have a church service, padre?" God knows the Canadian Scottish was not a battalion of saints, but they were not all sinners either. But saints or sinners, there was a war to be fought, and if the padre dwelt on things Heavenly, the man in the ranks did everything he could to speed the journey of the SS troops to another sphere so they could not create so much Hell around Putot.

The enemy troops in front of Putot were kept on the hop by several attacks during the ten days the Canadian Scottish occupied the village. On June 11 the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment and the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada put in a strong though unsuccessful attack on Le Mesnil-Patry. Although the troops were forced to withdraw, their attack hammered some of

¹ Personal narrative, R.S.M. Fisher. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness", someone said on this occasion. "But no substitute for it!" the Padre was quick to reply.

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the aggressiveness out of the panzer grenadier regiment. Five days later a British attack on Cristot and Le Hamel achieved greater success, and as a result a platoon from "A" Company, plus three sections of carriers, went forward over the railroad line to occupy the orchards just north of Le Mesnil-Patry. A carrier patrol reported the village clear of the enemy. Later that evening "C" Company was ordered to occupy the village, then still burning from the previous day's bombardment, and filled with mines and booby-traps. On the next day, June 16, about half the battalion moved across the railway track, but they had scarcely done so when the unit was warned to be prepared to move again.

The switchover between the 7th and 8th Brigades meant for the Canadian Scottish a change in location from Putot to the Rots - Le Hamel area five miles due east. The latter was occupied by Le Regiment de la Chaudière. It was the first relief the battalion had experienced in action, and if it was to be done properly it would have to be a smooth, efficient operation. The problem for each battalion was to take over the other's defences at the same time and in the same proportion so that both battalions' areas would contain an equal and sufficient number of men to guard against an enemy attack. The move was to take place at night, so on the afternoon of June 17 the battalion's second in command, Major C. M. Wightman, the company commanders or their seconds in command, and about 10 or 15 Jeep or carrier drivers, signallers and runners, set out for Rots. Their job was to meet with the Chaudières to look over their new company areas, and to guide the battalion into these areas, when it arrived. A series of code names given over the wireless by the signallers had been arranged which would let the C.O. in Putot know when the sub-units of the Chaudières were leaving so the Canadian Scottish could start moving in. The plan itself was simple. The forward elements of the Chaudières were to start moving out at two-thirty in the morning and the entire unit would be out before dawn.

Things did not go quite as planned. Arriving at Rots, Major Wightman attended the Chaudières "O" Group. However, the orders were given in French and, as Wightman recalls, "even with our best school French we didn't have a clue as to what was going on. However, they offered us a drink and said they would take us up to their areas and show us their positions and

all would be well".² But unknown to Major Wightman and the others, the Commanding Officer of the Chaudières had given orders that his unit would withdraw at about nine-thirty that evening, and the first intimation the Canadian Scottish officers had that the Chaudière's withdrawal did not coincide with the time of their takeover was when they saw and heard the French-Canadian unit actually on the move.

Protests produced only shrugs of the shoulder—a wonderful Gallic gesture which means so much and explains so little. Fearing that the enemy might realize what was happening if he sent a wireless message back to Cabeldu, Wightman sent his runner back on foot to Brigade Headquarters to inform them of the situation and have them pass on the information to the Canadian Scottish. "In the interim", he wrote later, "the company commanders and myself were gradually getting grey hair wondering how we could fill this battalion front with about six officers, six runners, two signallers and four Bren gunners".³

Actually, even this small group was not wholly available to man the front. Wightman, his two signallers and a Bren gunner set up a temporary battalion headquarters in an orchard, a situation which, he felt, would give him "a better and quicker chance to see how the situation would develop". The other officers had a runner, a Jeep driver and one or two had a Bren gunner each. The runners, however, had to leave them and go to a pre-arranged spot to meet and guide the incoming companies. There was only one thing to do, and that was to hang on. For the next five hours, therefore, about a dozen officers and men represented the total defensive force holding down a front normally manned by 500 to 600 men. In one case an officer with a pistol and his Jeep driver with his rifle defended the left-flank. In the centre Major Crofton, in a carrier, dashed back and forth over the area firing bursts from the Bren gun periodically to let the enemy know the front was still occupied. The company wireless sets, naturally, were still with the battalion in Putot, so the defenders had not the slightest idea of what was going on behind them or on their flank. It was a weird task—and a very lonely one.

Wightman, meanwhile, was getting messages from Brigade

² Personal narrative, Lt-Col. C. M. Wightman.

³ *Ibid.*

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Headquarters asking why he was not sending the planned code words signifying the withdrawal of the Chaudières. In this "snafu" he did not dare tell them over the wireless of his situation. When the runner he sent arrived at Brigade Headquarters the mystery was cleared up, and Lt-Col. Cabeldu sent the battalion on its cross-country compass march to Rots at once. Going through fields and orchards, across streams, over fences, stumbling upon hidden ditches, shell holes and abandoned slit trenches, going up hill and down dale—all this at night, in a strange land, and with the enemy close at hand—this is an experience which few will forget. One officer claimed later that in the rush he led his company for quite a distance along a "road" on the map which later, on closer inspection, turned out to be a grid line. But despite the method, there were none who regretted leaving Putot where the stench of the dead lay heavy over the village. A few hours after midnight the "defenders of Rots" welcomed the main body of the battalion and before dawn the Canadian Scottish had taken over and settled into the positions formerly occupied by the Chaudières. When day broke an enemy soldier looking at the area would have noticed no change and little movement. In fact he would probably wonder why there had not been the usual number of Canadian patrols out the previous night and why the Canadians in Rots had fired periodic bursts of machine gun fire along their front. If only he knew!

The three weeks the Canadian Scottish spent in the Rots - Le Hamel area were quiet ones only in that the battalion was not engaged in any major offensive or defensive action. But the forward defended localities around Caen were never dull, and the constant patrols sent out by the enemy and by the unit, to say nothing of the ordinary, everyday shell and mortar fire, kept all ranks on their toes. It also gave the large number of new replacements in the unit, both officers and men, a chance to get acquainted with the battalion as well as the enemy.

The two villages, separated by the narrow Mue River, were in a slight depression, with the farm and pasture fields rising gradually so as to conceal any view of Caen some four miles to the south-east. However, from the upper storey of a schoolhouse in Rots, one of several good O.Ps. (Observation Posts) in the area, an observer could get an excellent view of the enemy's positions

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from Gruchy in the north-east to Marcelet in the south-east, with the high ground concealing only Caen and a small part of the Carpiquet airfield.⁴ The enemy could and did take advantage of the high ground he held to bring down fire on any movement he noticed in Rots or Le Hamel, thus forcing the men to stick to their slit trenches during the daylight hours. The battalion's O.P. in the schoolhouse, however, was used to good effect by our naval and artillery observers to churn up any enemy troops or vehicles which, in their turn, might be foolish enough to expose themselves to view.

The O.P., in fact, became extremely popular throughout most of the British Second Army—or so it seemed. Part of this popularity was owing to the preparations then underway by the British VIII Corps to launch an attack which would bring that corps south of Caen. Part, too, was owing to the fact that the O.P. was one of the best available on the Caen perimeter. In any event, there was a steady parade of brigade, divisional and corps commanders to the O.P. to observe the enemy positions. Then the Army Commander, Lieutenant-General H. D. G. Crerar, paid it a visit.⁵

In Putot the enemy had been dug in close to the Canadian Scottish front, usually within 100-200 yards, and at times within throwing distance of a hand grenade. At Rots the situation was different. The Germans were about 1,000 yards away, generally beyond the range of small arms fire of all but the most forward slit trenches and snipers' posts. This wide "no-man's land", if not dominated by the battalion's patrols, was certainly frequented by them in sufficient numbers and strength that the enemy could not look upon the area as his special preserve. Far from it. The Canadian Scottish sent out fighting patrols, liaison patrols, listening patrols, reconnaissance patrols, patrols of all sorts. They ranged over an area as far forward as the outskirts of Authie, bringing back a steady stream of information regarding the enemy's positions, troops and vehicle movement, suspected and known weapon emplacements, the construction of minefields or barbed wire entanglements, and a variety of miscellaneous intelligence which helped to build up an accurate picture of the enemy's defences and activity. The patrols varied in strength from two or three men

⁴ W.D., 1 C Scot R, June 22, 1944.

⁵ *Ibid.*, June 21, 1944. The Canadian Army under Lieutenant-General Crerar did not take over a section of the front until July 23. Up to that time the Canadians remained under the command of the British Second Army.

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to almost a platoon, depending on the task at hand. Usually they went out at night and returned before dawn, although occasionally they stayed out for 24 hours, hiding in the field crops or hedges all day. Not all were successful, and those sent out to nab a prisoner found the SS troops were prone to stick together for mutual protection against just such raids as the Scottish had in mind. The fieldcraft the men had learned in training was exercised to the fullest degree during this period of incessant patrolling, and it was this technique, practised along the enemy front opposite Rots, that soon made experts out of amateurs.

The men also became experts at scrounging, as attested by the following account. One day R.S.M. Fisher, visiting "C" Company's area, came upon Ptes. Wing Hay, MacKenzie-Grieve and Swartz who had billeted themselves in the village post office. They asked the R.S.M. if he had seen their flock of chickens, and as he had not, they proudly escorted him to "their" chicken run. The chickens, of course, belonged to a Frenchman who used to come every day, feed the hens and gather up the eggs. Using their initiative the three soldiers found an unexploded German shell, chalked "La Mort" on it for good measure, and placed it tenderly in the middle of the chicken yard. The next time the Frenchman came he stopped short—this was no place for him! So from a safe distance, the farmer threw the grain over the fence to feed his flock and went his way. No sooner would he go than the three liberators nipped in, collected the eggs, and withdrew gracefully to their billets, leaving the dud shell where it was. This well planned and carefully organized operation produced results, until the farmer sent his wife to do the egg-collecting.⁶

Enemy shell and mortar fire on Rots and Le Hamel, although not severe, caused more casualties in the battalion than anything else. On June 26 the enemy began to range some of his heavy artillery on the two villages, and their accuracy aroused some concern that enemy observers in civilian clothes were correcting the enemy's fire. During the course of the evening one shell hit the farmhouse where Battalion Headquarters was located. The shell exploded inside the building with a crash and a sheet of flame, hurling steel, bricks and wood splinters in all directions. Lieuts. R. Nicoletti, the Signals Officer, F. H. Werts, the Intelligence

⁶ Personal narrative, R.S.M. Fisher.

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Officer and Lieut. O'Neil, a Mortar Officer from the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, were killed instantly or mortally wounded. Lt-Col. Cabeldu, Major C. M. Wightman, Captain R. S. Gray, Sgts. N. A. Lewis and H. Watkins, and Piper J. McMillan were all wounded. Battalion Headquarters itself was a shambles. Cabeldu, although cut about the face, managed to contact the brigade commander and informed him of the incident, and then he too was evacuated with the rest. Major A. H. Plows, with Major R. M. Lendrum as second in command, took over as commanding officer while Lieuts. J. P. R. Mollison and T. A. Burge took over as Adjutant and Intelligence Officer respectively. The reorganization of the unit's Tactical Headquarters was completed with dispatch, yet the blow at the "head" of the battalion was a hard one to take. Cabeldu came back two days later, but the others were hospitalized for weeks and months. The deaths of Lieut. Nicoletti, who had done a sterling job as "Sigs" officer, and Lieut. Werts, who had displayed remarkable coolness on D Day and at Putot in the face of enemy fire, were sincerely regretted. The only "fortunate" thing about the shelling was that so few were killed, and that it took place at a "quiet" front.

A few days later, on July 1, another incident occurred which also illustrates life on a so-called quiet front. Shortly after the British VIII Corps began its attack, the enemy was observed to have a considerable number of tanks in the Carpiquet area. To be on the safe side, Lt-Col. Cabeldu ordered Lieut. D. C. Bowen's Pioneer platoon to lay a minefield across a potential "tank run" or entrance to the battalion's position. Early on the morning of July 1 Pte. C. D. Potts was killed when a fuse he was preparing exploded in his hands. Two hours later the pioneers, together with several "D" Company men who were helping them, suffered eight fatal and one non-fatal casualties when a crate of mines exploded when being handled. Close to one of the badly wounded men, L/Cpl. F. H. Jensen saw one of the fused land mines burning. He grabbed a fire extinguisher from a nearby vehicle, ran up to the burning mine and doused it, knowing it might explode at any moment. For his quick thinking and bravery Jensen was awarded the British Empire Medal. These incidents, together with shelling, mortaring and patrolling, were always in the background when

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the report went back that "there was no special activity" on the battalion front.

The quiet period around Rots and Le Hamel was soon to be broken. The British drive to the south, which started on the same day Battalion Headquarters was shelled, resulted in the capture of a small bridgehead over the Odon River a few miles south-west of Caen. The enemy, reacting strongly to this threat, committed the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions and part of the 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions to check the advance.⁷ Although unable to achieve as deep a thrust as it had hoped, the British Corps opened the way for an attack on Caen from the west. As a follow-up to their attack, and as a preliminary to a final, massive assault on the city, the Canadian 8th Brigade, with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles under command, was given the task of capturing the Carpiquet area. From the schoolhouse and other O.Ps. in the Canadian Scottish lines, observers had an excellent view of the 8th Brigade's attack on July 4. The heavy artillery support, the rocket-firing Typhoon aircraft winging low over the battlefield, the distant roar and thunder of shell and mortar fire and the rumble of tanks — all were presented in a panoramic view.

Meanwhile, at Corps Headquarters, Lieutenant-General J. T. Crocker was preparing his plan for the capture of Caen. Three divisions were involved. On the left the 3rd (British) Division would strike from the north, in the centre the 59th (British) Division would attack from the north-west, while the 3rd Canadian Division would go in from the west. The corps attack would have strong artillery support which would include naval fire, and an aerial bombardment by some 500 bomber aircraft on the night prior to the attack would be sent against Caen.

With the Canadian 8th Brigade holding the recently captured Carpiquet area, the hammer blows by the 3rd Division were to be struck by the 9th and 7th Brigades with armoured support. The 9th Brigade, leading the attack, was to capture Gruchy, Buron and Authie, thus seizing the same area where they had met the first German armoured counter-attack on D plus one. In the second phase, the 7th Brigade would continue the attack with the Regina Rifles on the right capturing the Ardenne area with its old abbey while the Canadian Scottish took out the Cussy area on the

⁷ C. P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (King's Printer, Ottawa) 1948, p. 185.

left. The Winnipegs, now back with the brigade after their excellent show at Carpiquet, would be in reserve.⁸ The capture of these positions would leave the Canadians on the outskirts of Caen, a position they would hold while the British flushed out the enemy in the city itself.

It should be noted that the aerial strike was timed for the evening of July 7/8, that is, several hours before the corps attack was to be launched. Moreover, in order to ensure a wide safety zone between our troops and the bombed area, the air strike would hit at the city itself rather than on the numerous, strongly fortified villages around Caen which formed the enemy's main line of defence. Thus as far as the Canadians were concerned, although the air attack was a great morale booster, in effect it would warn the enemy of an impending attack, and it was timed so far in advance of the main assault that the German soldier would have time to recover from the bombardment to "greet" the attackers.

Since, too, the role of the 7th Brigade was one of exploitation in a limited sense, its success was dependent on the success of others. The villages and defended positions which both brigades had to seize bristled with German arms and tanks, each a fortress in itself. They had to be plucked out one by one, an example of the difficulties encountered in penetrating defences in depth. Thus the operation order was careful to state that the 7th Brigade "will not move out of the concentration area Lasson - Cairon until Buron and Gruchy are captured, and will not launch its attack before the Chateau de St. Louet, Buron, Authie and St. Contest are firmly held".⁹

The Canadian Scottish plan was simple and straightforward. After concentrating in the Cairon area, the battalion would be moved to its assembly area behind Gruchy, after which it would form up and cross the start-line, the road running between Buron and Authie. A line drawn from the wood between these two villages to the western outskirts of Cussy represented the brigade's axis of advance as well as the boundary between the Reginas and the Scottish. "C" Squadron of the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment, as well as the 14th Field Regiment, R.C.A., would support the unit to its objective. From its start-line the battalion would

⁸ W.D., 1 C Scot R, July, 1944, Appx. 1, 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde. Operation "Charnwood".

⁹ *Ibid.*

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advance with "A" Company (now commanded by Captain W.H.V. Matthews, M.C.) on the right and "C" Company on the left. Following close behind would be "B" and "D" Companies, right and left respectively. "A" Company's objective was an enemy strongpoint about 300 yards short of Cussy. "B" and "C" Companies would continue to take Cussy by a pincer attack, with "D" Company in reserve. Covering fire was to be given by two sections of carriers on the high ground on the left flank while a platoon of medium machine guns from the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa would bring their fire on the enemy from the left rear of the village.

The terrain over which the Scottish were to pass was somewhat the same as that around Putot—an undulating farmland, with the grain in the fields grown high beneath the summer's sun. The ground rose very slowly the farther one got into enemy territory until, beyond the old abbey, it sloped down into Caen. It can be seen that this ground favoured the enemy—the 12th SS "Hitler Youth" Panzer Division—and they knew how to make use of it. When the company and platoon commanders were given "defence overprint" maps before going into the attack—that is, maps showing in red ink the location of enemy defences, weapon pits, gun sites, etc.—one officer remarked that there was so much red on the map that it was difficult to trace his own platoon's route on it.¹⁰

At eight o'clock on the evening of July 7 the Inns of Court Regiment began taking over the battalion's defences at Rots, and even before the men left their positions they had a grandstand view of the tremendous aerial bombardment of Caen. The enemy threw up so much anti-aircraft fire that the sky was almost black with exploding anti-aircraft shells, but the 500 bombers flew right through it. This was the only time the men in the forward positions could get out of their slit trenches during daylight in the Rots area, for once the bombs began to fall, the enemy kept his head well down and his fire slackened off. As dusk was falling the men, loaded with ammunition, grenades and heavier Piat and mortar bombs, began moving to the concentration area in Cairon. "En route," wrote a participant, "we crossed the front of a regiment of field artillery where the gunners pointed cheerfully to the piles of shells stacked by the guns and informed us that all of this was

¹⁰ Personal narrative, Lieut. N. T. Park.

going in before we did. This had an excellent effect on our morale".¹¹ That night a shaken but wary enemy hurled more than his usual ration of shells into the village; at dawn the men had a breakfast of sorts which they had scarcely finished when an ear-splitting barrage opened up, signifying the beginning of Operation "Charnwood".

The enemy reacted to the Canadian barrage with great vigor, shelling not only the 9th Brigade's troops and positions, but bringing their fire on Cairon as well. The battalion, located in a large estate on the eastern outskirts of Cairon, received some protection from the 10-foot stone wall surrounding the estate, but at that mortar fire caused some casualties.

At ten-thirty in the morning Lt-Col. Cabeldu was ordered to move his battalion to the assembly area close to Gruchy. Since the 7th Brigade's attack was timed to be launched upon the success of the 9th Brigade, only a tentative H Hour had been given the C.O.—two in the afternoon. But the bitter fighting in which the 9th Brigade was engaged made this tentative H Hour somewhat optimistic, and hence the Canadian Scottish was moved from its concentration area earlier than it might have been. With almost no cover available at the assembly area, this action was to cause even more casualties before the unit was actually committed.

When the orders came to move up, Lt-Col. Cabeldu had a tank ram several breaches in the stone wall to avoid going out by the main entrance to the estate which opened on the Cairon - Vieux Cairon road then under enemy shellfire. However, even as the leading platoons left through the holes punched in the wall, they were spotted by the enemy, and a mortar barrage was brought down across their axis of advance. They were pulled back after suffering several casualties. Rather than try a direct approach to Gruchy, therefore, Cabeldu decided to leave by the main entrance, but to cross the road and go around Vieux Cairon on the left rather than the right, thus taking advantage of the low ground on the north and north-western side of the village.¹²

When working their way around the village to the assembly area, a point roughly midway between Vieux Cairon and Gruchy, the leading platoons of "A" and "C" Companies were surprised

¹¹ Personal narrative, Captain S. L. Chambers.

¹² Personal narrative, Brigadier F. N. Cabeldu.

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to find enemy soldiers still huddled in slit trenches by-passed by the 9th Brigade. First one was found, then another, then two or three more, some very frightened and others who still had fight left in them. When the men began to dig in in their assembly area, an open area exposed on all sides, a number of casualties were caused not only by shell fire but by snipers as well, with the result that the platoons commanded by Lieuts. Corry and Gallagher, after a bit of a scuffle, captured over 30 prisoners including an officer and killed or wounded half a dozen more.

The capture of the SS troops was unusual. First a very young SS soldier had surrendered who told a German-speaking Canadian Scottish private that there were more around and "did we want them?" Assured we did, the German gave a piercing whistle and up out of their trenches came the remainder. This cleared out the snipers, but the shelling and mortaring of the area provided plenty of incentive to all ranks to dig fast and deep.

Close to "B" Company in this assembly area were the tanks in a "hull down" position, and by standing on the track of the squadron leader's tank one could look through his telescope and see enemy armour moving around Cussy. It was also easy to see that the 9th Brigade attack was being bitterly opposed on all sides, and that hard fighting was going on in Buron and Authie. At about three in the afternoon Lt-Col. Cabeldu received orders from Brigade Headquarters to move to the F.U.P. (Forming Up Place), a few hundred yards behind the start-line. "From experience already gained", he wrote later, "I could visualize many casualties while waiting close to the start-line for our zero hour. I therefore asked the Brigadier for permission to remain where we were, assuring him that we would make a forced march to the start-line and hit it at the appointed zero hour". This was good battle psychology and was accepted. About two hours later the C.O. was informed that H Hour was set for five-thirty. It was time to go, and within minutes the entire battalion, with each company spread out in battle order, was on its way to the start-line.

Gruchy had not yet been cleared, and fighting was still going on in Buron and St. Contest, but fortunately the enemy was so taken up with the 9th Brigade that the Canadian Scottish swept over the start-line on time. Once over the line, the men kept within 50 to 60 yards of their creeping artillery barrage, a somewhat

nerve-wracking experience at first, but nevertheless a type of battle-field insurance which yielded good premiums. Close to the start-line was a barbed wire fence, parts of which were booby-trapped with grenades. Cpl. J. E. Dodd and Captain W. H. V. Matthews took a running leap over this obstacle and Cpl. Mitchell, coming behind, tried the same trick. He tripped and fell, flattening the fence in the best "battle drill" style, and making it easy for those behind him.

Once beyond Buron, walking at a steady pace "as if on a South Downs exercise", and within a few hundred yards of Cussy, all Hell broke loose as the Canadian Scottish came under a hail of fire from the enemy's mortars, "Moaning Minnies", machine guns, anti-tank guns—in fact from every weapon in the German arsenal, it seemed. The ground shuddered and shook with the pounding of exploding shells and bombs. Men were covered with dirt, grimed with dust and some dazed and knocked over by blast as the SS troops poured their fire into the open fields over which the Reginas and the Scottish advanced. It was the most intense and concentrated fire the men had ever experienced.

Lieut. J. D. Lorimer, commanding the leading platoon of "A" Company in this battle, wrote vividly of his impressions in the midst of this maelstrom:

Just as we started our advance was hailed by the enemy with a terrific bombardment of mortar bombs and artillery shells. What with our own barrage just 100 yards ahead, and the enemy barrage attempting to hit us, the noise of the explosions and the whistling of the shells was deafening. How we did not suffer heavy casualties I do not know. As it was none of my platoon was hit in the initial stages. Once when I looked back to see how my platoon and the Company was progressing, a shell landed dangerously close to Company Headquarters. I saw Captain Matthews go down and I thought he was a goner. However, to my relief, he soon rose to his feet and continued. A piece of shapnel had nicked him in the side.

The shelling became heavier and we began to lose men. One by one they dropped. . . . I remember once signalling with thumb and forefinger forming an "O" back to Sgt. John Crawley who was leading platoon headquarters signifying that everything was O.K. With a broad grin he replied with the same sign.¹³

It was quickly realized that this weight of fire was coming from

¹³ Personal diary, Lieut. J. D. Lorimer. Lieutenant Lorimer was one of four brothers, all of whom were with the battalion in action. Lieut. Lorimer was wounded just on the outskirts of the company's objective.

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all sides. In fact, both flanks were wide open since on the left the British had not captured Bitot which dominated the Scottish axis and the Reginas, on the right, while suffering heavy casualties in their gallant attack against Authie, were still battling to get into that village and beyond their start-line.

In the middle of the battalion, coming along the road which served as the axis of advance, was Tactical Headquarters. Lt-Col. Cabeldu was, as usual, well to the front.¹⁴ Next came the half-track and about 300 yards behind it was the acting second in command, Major Plows. Plows was trying to spot the location of the 88-mm. guns which were shelling the road with professional accuracy, but before he could locate them his small group was hit. Plows, wounded and stunned by the shell blast, was put out of action and a signaller was killed. Up ahead Cabeldu and the I.O., Lieut. T. A. Burge, were trying to silence the hail of fire from Bitot also. The Intelligence Officer relates:

The battalion half-track was knocked out, wounding most of the occupants, including the Adjutant, Captain Mollison. Lt-Col. Cabeldu asked me to contact the C.O.'s. artillery representative and ask him to bring fire on this Bitot area. I contacted him but unfortunately, due to the heavy dust and smoke from the falling shells, he could not quite make out the area where the fire was coming from. I told him I would go to one of the tanks nearby [the squadron commander's tank] and get him to fire a shell directly on the area, then they could arrange an artillery barrage. I climbed up on the tank and directed the officer in charge to the area where the gun was firing and he fired a shot which, as far as I could tell, was very nearly on the spot. The C.O.'s. Arty. Rep. saw the area immediately and within a minute and a half managed to bring down very heavy fire on the area in Bitot which was causing the trouble.¹⁵

That helped to lessen some of the fire for a while, but the enemy in Cussy and on the ground beyond was still firing at an intense rate on the battalion, and the Reginas, saving their barrage until they got beyond Authie, had not yet brought their supporting fire to bear on the area between Authie and the old abbey at Ardenne, their objective.

Meanwhile, and it was now close to six o'clock, about 500

¹⁴ Wrote a company commander later: "Here, as in every other action, a company commander had a most comfortable feeling that with Fred Cabeldu at the helm we were being *looked* at; that he was in a position to *see* at all times and if we were in a jam help would be on its way if it was physically possible".

¹⁵ Personal narrative, Lieut. T. A. Burge.

or 600 yards farther on from Tactical Headquarters, "A" Company was about to hit its objective, at which point its action is described in the following words:

As the curtain of arty. shells lifted, our objective stood out clearly before us across the fields. On the instant the signal to advance was given and with a cry "Come on, Scottish" we surged forward. A spatter of small arms fire greeted us from the strong point and was returned with interest on the move as we doubled forward. A Dannert wire fence was encountered but proved of little use to the defenders. . . . The 88-mm. gun in the strong-point had been hit by one of our shells and as we approached the enemy placed a charge on it and damaged it further. The defenders had no taste for the cold steel and furious yells of the company and the greater majority beat a hasty retreat as we closed in. C.S.M. Grimmond did a grand job throughout urging the men on completely regardless of the heavy fire and was blown up several times by shells, miraculously escaping injury. The enemy attempted to make another line of defence at the back of the strong-point but soon abandoned that too as Nos. 7 and 8 platoons tore forward to consolidate.¹⁶

"At about this time", wrote the commander of No. 7 platoon,

Pte. Veevers drew my attention to a tank sitting at the edge of the hedgerow. Only the top of the turret was visible over the hedge and as I could not believe that a German tank could have got there I disregarded it. I learned later that it was a German tank and that Lt. Park of "B" Company had fired at its crew commander with a rifle. This apparently discouraged the crew commander from advancing further into "B" Company's area and he proceeded along the hedge to our front. This was not noticed by me although Lieut. Heffernan's platoon engaged the tank unsuccessfully with a P.I.A.T. Unaware of the approach of this tank Cpl. Dodd and I ran through the hedge to capture three Germans whom we had seen come out of the village and circle behind "C" Company in the wheat. When we reached them, these Germans looked horrified to a greater degree than . . . [our] arrival would warrant and I noticed they were looking past us. I turned around to see the tank traversing its turret in our direction and at the same instant the tank burst into flame.¹⁷

On the right, by this time, "B" Company was in the thick of it. Major Lendrum had planned to use the dirt road coming in from the north-west to guide the company around the right flank of the village. No. 11 platoon, under Lieut. S. R. Ross, left of the road, would clear the orchards and buildings on its axis to a point on the other side of the village while No. 10 platoon, commanded

¹⁶ W.D., 1 C Scot R, July 1944, Appx. 1, "'A' Company—Cussy, July 8, 1944".

¹⁷ Chambers, *op. cit.*

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by Lieut. N. T. Park, right of the road, would sweep to the right and take up a position in the fields beyond Cussy facing the old abbey. No. 12 platoon, commanded by Lieut. Corsan, was in reserve. The company, however, quickly became embroiled in such a sticky situation that its task was made extremely difficult.

Lieut. Park's platoon had no sooner started towards its objective than it came under fire from a machine gun post to its right rear. The platoon commander decided to leave this gun for the reserve platoon to tackle and to cross over the road to get to his platoon objective. Just as the men were about to cross, however, the platoon

. . . saw an enemy tank approaching down the road towards us about 50 yards away. We stopped cold. . . . I noticed the tank commander standing up in the turret so I took a shot at him with my rifle. I missed and he turned and glared at us and the tank stopped. Our hearts stopped at the same time and we waited for a blast from the tank's gun which was pointed straight at us. For some inexplicable reason the tank not only did not fire but traversed up the road a few yards. It then turned off the road and straddling the next hedge to ours ran along it presumably in the hope of running down anyone who may have taken cover behind the hedge.¹⁸

As we have seen, the tank ran into "A" Company. Sgt. Frost had raced back and brought up a "Piat" but by the time he returned the tank had been hit and was "brewing up". This tank was put out of action by one of the supporting tanks whose fire was directed at this time by Sgt. Kent of the mortar platoon.

Lieut. Park's platoon then crossed the road but was still under fire from the machine gun as well as being hammered by the enemy's shell and mortar fire falling on the entire battalion. The machine gun, however, was more personal. Cpl. Evans asked permission to take it out with a section of men but, badly understrength and not wishing to be diverted from his objective, Lieut. Park took up L/Cpl. Parrent's offer to take it on himself. "Parrent ran straight at the position firing the Bren from his hip. As he got close three Jerries jumped from cover and ran, with Parrent chasing them. They disappeared from view in a patch of brush, then we heard some more blasts from the Bren and

¹⁸ Park, *op. cit.* In doing so, this German tank almost ran over Lieut. Lorimer, of "A" Company, who had been wounded. Pte. Lamb, a soldier in his platoon and also wounded, was unable to move, and the tank ran over his foot.

in a few minutes Parrent reappeared with a look of satisfaction on his face.”

Meanwhile, deploying to the right, the platoon took what cover they could along the hedgerows running at right angles from the road. The company area was being plastered with enemy fire, and it was noted that much of it was coming from the grounds of the old abbey which, in itself, provided the enemy with a sweeping view of “B” Company’s present position and objective. The only way to get forward was to try to leapfrog the section from hedge to hedge, but when Park tried that the enemy brought down accurate fire causing more casualties.

Company Headquarters, dug in at a junction of the road and a hedge, was in a precarious position, so headquarters personnel were directed into a nearby German anti-aircraft pit which offered some protection. The men ran there, leaped in, disturbing four German soldiers cowering in a dugout. But even with German soldiers below and German fire ripping through the air above, the headquarters still had to function. The company’s second in command, Captain Ramsay, described the situation at headquarters at about this time as follows:

Pte. Holness approached Coy HQ from 12 Pl. as runner and before he could hear our commands [for him] to crawl [towards us] he was shot through the head. Our No. 46 [wireless set] would not work but, from the sounds on the left and in the village, we knew that hot fighting was going on. Lieut. Ross of No. 11 platoon arrived with his runner to report the arrival of his platoon forward of the village. He also reported the presence of 12 enemy tanks commanding the right flank plus 3 medium machine gun positions mutually supporting, and fire from the abbey which was still German held. He had roughly one section left under Sgt. Proverbs and left them reorganized on the right of the village when he came back to report. Lieut. Ross was lying on the edge of the trench talking when he was hit.¹⁹

With the signallers unable to contact Lt-Col. Cabeldu, Captain Ramsay went back to tactical headquarters with the German prisoners to get a wireless set and medical aid, passing on his way many wounded whom, at this point, it was impossible to evacuate.

On the left of the village, “C” Company had stormed into the cauldron in Cussy closely supported by two sections of the

¹⁹ W.D., 1 C Scot R, July, 1944, Appx. 1, “‘B’ Company—Cussy”.

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3-inch mortar platoon. Dashing across the open fields in front of Bitot, two mortars were set up in the fields and rained mortar bombs on the enemy ahead until their ammunition was down to a 20-bomb reserve against counter-attacks, whereupon Sgt. Kent and his crew fought with rifles and Bren guns until more ammunition was brought up. Two carriers were hit, several men were killed and wounded from enemy shellfire, and a running battle with enemy machine gunners was kept up until the platoon commander, racing back and forth over this fire-swept area, managed to get some of the mortars firing again near the Cussy crossroad.

“C” Company itself went in with Lieut. J. L. Gallagher’s platoon (No. 13) on the right, Lieut. G. D. Corry’s platoon (No. 15) on the left and Lieut. J. L. Harling’s platoon (No. 14) in reserve. Halfway to its objective the company came under terrific crossfire from Bitot on the left and the abbey on its right front. Machine gun fire from Cussy was thickened by enemy tank fire, one on the company right flank and another from an old burnt-out tank the enemy was using as a machine gun post near Bitot. This caused about 20 casualties even before the company hit its objective. “On arrival on our objective”, wrote Major Crofton,

Our men went in with the bayonet and let out blood-curdling yells which put to flight at least 75 Germans who were manning two 88-mm [and] two Howitzer guns, an anti-aircraft gun and other defensive positions.²⁰

Orders were given for No. 13 platoon to clear all the houses on the right of the village, No. 15 platoon to clear those on the left, and No. 14 platoon to send one section to clear the slit trenches with the remaining two sections staying with Company Headquarters in reserve north of the village. Lieut. Gallagher describes his platoon’s assault in part:

We had just begun to move in when an enemy tank moved out from the flank of the village in a position enfilade to our assault line. Luckily it fired only one or two short bursts at us and then took on a target well to our left. The presence of the tank, and the fact that the occupants of this gun position in the orchard to our front were running back and forth firing at us, forced me to change my plans and we assaulted straight ahead.

We went through the orchard clearing the dugouts and following

²⁰ *Ibid.*, “‘C’ Company, July 8, 1944”.

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a large number of enemy who broke and ran. At this time we had No. 15 platoon on our left. . . .

We pushed through to the road beyond the orchard and came under fire from the left. While we were pinned down we spotted another tank to our right.²¹

This tank was taken on by Cpl. Mitchell, from No. 15 platoon, and also by Cpl. Butlin and Pte. Watts. Both reported a successful shoot with their "Piats". Another tank followed later and met the same fate from other hands. Meanwhile "C" Company's platoons were busy clearing the houses, a job which was impossible to keep organized because of the jumbled arrangement of the buildings, the lack of support, the large number of snipers, cross-fire from the abbey and the approaching tank, and the mortar and artillery shells smacking into the village and raising so much dust and dirt that it was hard to see more than a few yards. During this action Lieut. Corry was wounded and Lieut. Harling, the latter an experienced reinforcement officer just posted to the battalion, was killed.

So terrific was the fire and so great was the carnage in Cussy that Lt-Col. Cabeldu, a short distance away, feared his battalion was being cut to pieces. He was doing everything he could—calling up carriers to evacuate the wounded, bringing the tanks up to give close support to the infantry in the village, calling for additional artillery fire on Bitot, sending his anti-tank guns right into the village, and warning the brigadier that with ammunition running low and his casualties mounting, he would have to call on the reserve battalion, the Winnipeg Rifles, to send some help to thicken up the front. Major Lendrum had been called for to act as second in command to help repair the ravaged Tactical Headquarters.

"D" Company, in reserve, was edging to the left to take care of a possible counter-attack from Bitot and was suffering many casualties. So thick was the shellfire falling among his men that Major Henderson thought they were tramping on mines. His second in command, Captain C. E. C. McNeill, was blown up when an 88-mm. shell landed between him and his runner, killing the latter. Another shell decapitated Henderson's runner as he stood beside him, and his two signallers were blown up at about the same time. Whether in or out of the village itself all

²¹ *Ibid.*, "No. 13 Platoon's Report on Cussy".

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platoons were subjected to a withering fire. The one good point at this time was that off to the right Cabeldu could see the Reginas putting in their attack on the old abbey, thus taking some of the pressure off the battalion's right flank.

The anti-tank guns, deployed across the grain fields to cover any counter-attack by enemy armour, and subjected to mortar fire, were ordered up when the companies had sent back word of the numerous tanks milling about in the village and on its outskirts. The anti-tank platoon, commanded by Captain R. H. Tye, went in under heavy fire and upon entering the village they found the enemy fire so concentrated that it was impossible to employ more than three guns, under Cpl. Barton, Sgt. Dunn and Sgt. Pedersen. The remainder of the platoon deployed as infantry covering the approaches with Brens, Stens and rifles. Later Cpl. Barton's gun was found to have two machine gun bullets in its barrel, an indication of the intensity of the enemy's fire. There were few indeed who emerged from this battle without their uniform or equipment torn or holed by shellfire. One Canadian Scottish soldier, crouched in a ditch while machine gun fire probed for him, later stood up and his haversack dropped off. The machine gun rounds had cut the haversack straps.

The swirling, confused fighting in Cussy made it extremely difficult and sometimes impossible even for platoon commanders to keep a firm control of their men. "The whole action", wrote a platoon commander, "depended upon individual courage and initiative. It was impossible for even the section commanders to keep track of their whole section, but when two or three became separated one would take charge, and they would continue to try to work forward".²² "D" Company supported "C" and "A" Companies, and when a tank was chased from a field occupied by one platoon to an orchard occupied by another, it would be tracked down by anyone who had a "Piat" or manned an anti-tank gun. Similarly, a section chasing a group of Germans from one position to another might meet up with men from another platoon or company, and all would blast away at the enemy.

Three junior N.C.Os. were awarded the Military Medal for their leadership and aggressiveness during the Cussy attack. L/Cpl. F. A. Cherry, after his section leader was wounded, carried him

²² "No. 13 Platoon's Account . . .", *ibid.*

to safety and then rallied the section on to penetrate deeper into the enemy's defences under withering fire. Cpl. J. E. Dodd, leading one of the first sections into Cussy, set such an example of spirit and vigor, the latter with the bayonet, that he stood out at a time when bravery was common. Still another, L/Cpl. G. Kawiuk, won his award for his action with a "Piat". With three tanks approaching he grabbed the anti-tank weapon from a wounded comrade, fired at the lead tank and damaged it. The tank kept on coming, driving over the slit trench Kawiuk was in. When it passed he came up again and fired another bomb at it, destroying it and its crew. The other two retreated.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the battle, in fact, was the destruction of six or seven tanks by the infantrymen using the "Piat" or the anti-tank gun. The German tanks, moving behind hedgerows and other natural camouflage in the village, had been able to keep the 1st Hussars' "C" Squadron at bay much of the time since the latter presented excellent targets rolling over the fields towards Cussy. Once the infantrymen were in Cussy, however, this advantage was turned against them and they were hunted down with zeal whenever the opportunity offered. One of the enemy's tanks was captured intact.

As darkness began to fall things took a turn for the better. The stretcher bearers had done an excellent job. Pte. A. C. Cole, wounded while protecting one of his patients from mortar fire, was but one of the many stretcher bearers who patched up the wounded under the most hazardous conditions. Since one Jeep, sent up to bring back the wounded, had been hit and blown up when it was loaded with men already wounded, carriers were used for the job. As the Reginas threw in attack after attack to keep the enemy in the old abbey fully occupied, the German gunners and observers had less chance to pick off Canadian Scottish vehicles. As a result the method of evacuating the wounded to the Regimental Aid Post, and thence back to the Casualty Clearing Post of the 14th Field Ambulance, R.C.A.M.C., worked well.²³

With the enemy in the old abbey being slowly pounded into submission, and with "C" Squadron's tanks pouring their fire into the Bitot area to silence the enemy on that flank, the situation began to improve. The arrival of two companies of the Winnipegs

²³ Sgt. R. J. Duncan, Medical Sergeant, "Battle of Cussy, July, 1944", *ibid.*

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not only strengthened the weakly held area between "A" and "C" Companies, but they brought with them sorely needed ammunition. One of their companies was held in reserve against a possible counter-attack from the Bitot area.

The counter-attack never came. By ten-thirty that evening the Reginas had captured the abbey at Ardenne, thus silencing a hornet's nest and depriving the Germans of their excellent view over the brigade area. Bitot, too, was occupied by the British, and the enemy's fire died down to a desultory harassing fire. Cussy, Franqueville, Ardenne, Authie, Buron, Gruchy—they were all now firmly held in Canadian hands.

The cost had been high. During this assault on Caen the Canadian forces as a whole had lost more men than they had on D Day. This held true of the Canadian Scottish also. During the battle for Cussy the battalion suffered a total of 40 killed and 80 wounded. There was little compensation in the thought that the 12th SS Panzer Division had been very badly mauled. A comparison of such grim statistics probably brought unsmiling satisfaction to the staff planners at Corps and Army Headquarters. But within a battalion each figure on the casualty list was a friend or comrade lost, one whose offer of life or limb was ripped from him as the price of victory.

Early on July 9 Caen was occupied by British and Canadian troops. The enemy withdrew to Vaucelles on the eastern side of the Orne, leaving the battered city, well strewn with mines and booby traps, a scene of such ruin and desolation, of rubble-packed streets and shattered buildings, as the men had never seen. Two days later the Canadian Scottish moved into the city to take over from The King's Own Shropshire Light Infantry as part of the move of the 7th Brigade's relief of the British 9th Brigade. Despite the terrific pounding the civilian populace had received at the hands of our army and air force, the citizens of Caen gave the Allied army a warm if pathetic welcome.

For them, as for the soldiers, Caen was occupied but still very much subject to German fire of all kinds. The Canadian Scottish had "D" Company on an island between the Orne River and the canal, with the remaining companies dug in close to the river bank. Battalion headquarters was in a deep cellar in one of the buildings in the grounds of the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

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Across the narrow river and canal, in what was the industrial area of Caen, the enemy again had numerous excellent observation posts which he used to full advantage when he spotted any movement. "D" Company's plight in this area is described by the war diarist in these words:

"D" Coy's troops reported they were often sniped at by enemy on the river banks. A high wall protected most of our men from enemy view but [it] has been shelled down in places. It is a most serious game of "hide and go seek" with them and very hard on their nerves—particularly since they have had no real rest from shelling and mortaring since D Day. To get rations and water they cross to the mainland over a shaky bridge at night. Occasional bursts of M.G. fire add to the entertainment.²⁴

There is no doubt that over a month at the front, and having gone through three major battles in thirty days and losing about half the battalion through casualties in the process, was beginning to tell on the nerves of all ranks. The situation in Caen, although static, was generally miserable. The city, with French and German dead beneath the ruins and rubble, exuded an all-pervading smell of death. To this mixture of desolation, smell and dirt, was added continual harassing artillery and mortar fire during the day and night by an enemy who continued to have good observation of the city and its approaches. To add to the discomfort of the men, the Luftwaffe began sending its aircraft over the city at night, bombing and strafing indiscriminately any military targets north and west of the Orne. This shelling and bombing caused a constant trickle of casualties. Men were hit as they ate or slept or went from one place to another. Reinforcements coming to the battalion were sometimes killed or wounded before they ever reached the company to which they were posted. The "old timers" were cut down also in ones and twos every day. The initials "PBC" (Psychiatric Battle Casualty) appearing after a man's name on the casualty list, if not common, was no longer unique.²⁵

The one day "rest" at La Folie on July 17 was greatly appreciated, more for the opportunity it gave the men to use the mobile bath unit and a chance to get some clothes than anything else. But La Folie was still within easy range of the German artillery; the odd shell whizzed into the area during the rest period.

²⁴ W.D., 1 C Scot R, July 12, 1944.

²⁵ W.D., 1 C Scot R, July, 1944.

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At that the unit's brief stay here was broken when Operation "Goodwood" was launched on July 18. "Goodwood" was a major attack, supported by 1,000 bombers, designed to break through the enemy's hold south and south-east of Caen. The main blow was to be delivered by the three armoured divisions of the British VIII Corps. The 3rd Canadian Division had the task of clearing the area of Vaucelles - Cormelles while the recently arrived 2nd Canadian Division would attack from the south of Caen to seize the St. Andre sur Orne area.

The 7th Brigade was held in reserve, and thus had a chance to see something of the 2nd Division when it moved through Caen. It was a bit of a shock to see these Canadians fresh from England with their clean battledress, their well-kept and nicely painted vehicles, and their generally smart appearance. It almost seemed odd to the "veterans" to think that they once looked like that also. But in all too short a time the men in the 2nd Division would get that "slit trench look" too. Their battledress would be grimed and torn, their vehicles scarred and plastered with mud, their carriers holed and dented here and there by shrapnel, and their ears finely attuned to the whistle, whine or roar of shells and bombs to a point where they would know automatically whether to crouch or leap for cover.

On July 19 the Canadian Scottish moved across the Orne to Vaucelles and then on to Cormelles, a manufacturing suburb south-east of the city proper. Owing to the deep penetration of British armour Cormelles was taken by the Canadians with comparatively little trouble. The main opposition came from the enemy's artillery and, for a short time, from some of 2nd Division's shells falling short. But friendly or otherwise, the shelling caused casualties. Two days later the medium artillery unit supporting the offensive to the south moved right into the battalion's area and began to pound away at the enemy along the Bourguebus ridge. The pounding of the guns made sleep impossible. They thundered away with clock-like regularity and, as might be expected, brought down enemy retaliatory fire as well as enemy air bombing on Cormelles. High explosive and anti-personnel bombs, dropped by the light of flares, made life most unpleasant and made tempers even shorter and nerves more frayed.

By watching the level and direction of the gun barrels of the

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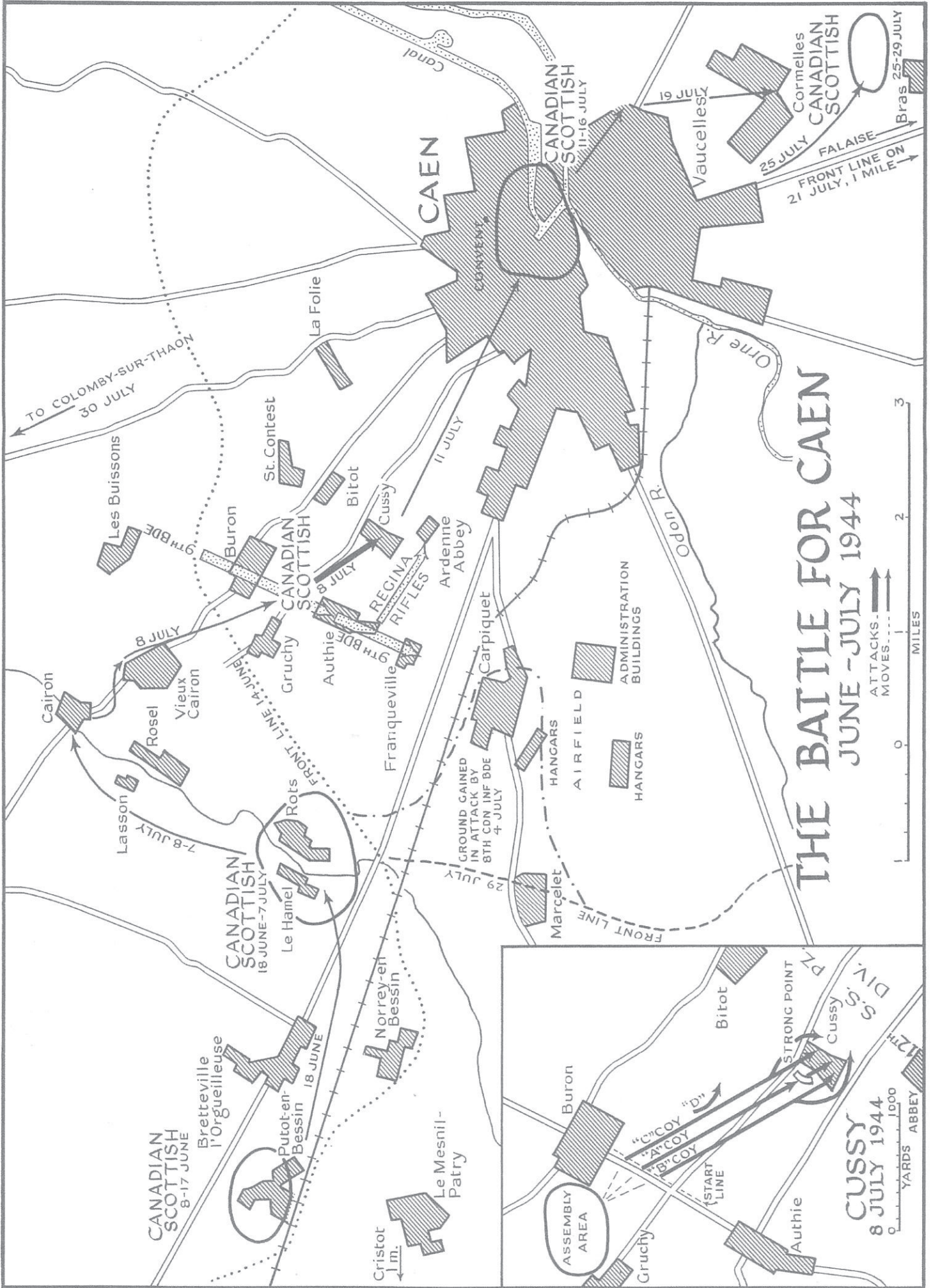
neighbouring batteries one could almost "read" the story of the VIII Corps attack. It was launched with great expectations and greater hope, but the armoured thrusts by British divisions on July 18 and 19, although penetrating about eight miles beyond the start-line, were halted when they hit the strong German defensive lines Field Marshal Rommel had prepared on the high ground along the Verrieres - Vimont line. It soon became apparent that the capture of this line would be primarily an infantry task, a task which the Canadian corps commander, Lieutenant-General G. G. Simonds, was ordered to undertake at once.

Operation "Spring", as the attack was named, had a two-fold purpose. Locally it was hoped that it might pierce the enemy's front to permit the 7th and Guards Armoured Divisions to exploit and seize positions on the high ground east of the Falaise road and well to the south. Taken in a broader view, however, it was to serve as a "holding attack" to keep enemy forces from moving to the American front. The United States army was to start its battle to break out of the Cherbourg peninsula on the same day Operation "Spring" was launched. To keep the enemy engaged around Caen, and if possible to attract additional German forces away from the American front, was the responsibility of the Canadian Corps. However, as we now know, Operation "Goodwood" itself had almost accomplished what "Spring" set out to do. The enemy expected the break-through to come from the eastern side of the Allied front and he had prepared strong lines of defence to prevent just such an attempt. Most of his panzer divisions were in the Caen area, and as a result of VIII Corps' armoured thrusts, he brought still more troops into the region.

He pulled the 2nd Panzer Division and the 9th SS Panzer Division eastward across the Orne from his central sector, and the 116th Panzer Division had . . . arrived from the Pas de Calais and was in reserve north of Falaise. There were now, in fact, six enemy armoured divisions in or closely in rear of the comparatively short sector east of the Orne. A more formidable proposition than an attack on this line in these circumstances it would be difficult to imagine . . .²⁶

It was against this massive array of enemy armour and artillery that the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions attacked on July 25th. Two days previously Lt-Col. Cabeldu had received his orders concerning the attack, and by the 25th the

²⁶ C. P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, pp. 190-191.



Ready For The Fray was the first of a dozen books written by the author on Canadian military and defence matters. Dr. R.H. Roy, CD, Ph.D., FRHS, served as an Infantry Lieutenant in the Italian and North-West European theatres during the Second World War, after which, having completed university studies, he worked in the Army Historical Section in Ottawa for two years. Thereafter, he taught History at the University of Victoria, and was the first to be appointed to its Chair of Military and Strategic Studies which he held for many years prior to his retirement as *Professor Emeritus*.

Dr. Roy, as Honorary Lieutenant Colonel of 741 (Victoria) Communications Squadron since 1988, continues to participate actively in promoting the interests of the Army Reserves within the Canadian Forces.

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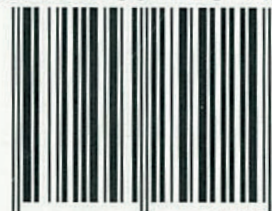
Major D. M. Grubb, CD (Retired), the editor of the additional material for the years 1955-2002, began his service in 1962 through the Canadian Officers' Training Corps at the University of Victoria. His Commanding Officer there was Major R.H. Roy. Thereafter, as an Army Reserve officer he served in The Canadian Scottish Regiment, with two interruptions caused by his civilian obligations, from 1965 to 1985, prior to transferring to the Personnel Selection Branch.

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